

COMIC BOOK COINAGES

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My wife and I were on a plane high over the Atlantic en route to England. We occupied aisle seats, and next to us was a young English lad, obviously returning home with his parents (in the row behind us) after a visit to the United States. On the boy's lap was a comic book -- I've forgotten the title -- and an English dictionary was at his side. A Latin dictionary lay on the floor. He had a puzzled expression on his face and it seemed as though he might be close to tears for his chin trembled ever so slightly. After observing him for a while out of the corner of my eye I leaned towards him and asked if something was troubling him. Silently, he pointed to the comic book open on his lap, and to a fearsome drawing of some beings undoubtedly from outer space. The caption of the drawing, hand-lettered, and frighteningly large, was S-P-P-L-E-E-C-H!

"I've looked in all my dictionaries," he told me bravely, "but I can't find what it means; and Pater -- my Father, I mean -- doesn't like me to ask unnecessary questions." I glanced to the seat behind me where Pater sat with closed eyes and a copy of Creasy's Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World open (at "Waterloo"?) on his lap.

"I promise not to tell him I helped -- Boy Scout's Honor."

"Oh, thanks awfully!" said my new friend warmly. I then began to explain SPPLEECH as best I might. I told him that it could not be found in the usual dictionaries because it was a new word, made up at the spur of the moment by the artist; that it was an interjection, and possibly onomatopoeic, and that the etymology of such words was usually unknown. I told him, too, that artists and authors often had to use such words because space was not available for lengthy explanations. His eager face showed that I may have left him behind at some point, but I continued, "So you see, your dictionaries won't help you at all. Best to just look at the picture and draw your own conclusions about the word. The SPPLEECH is coming from the ray-gun those fellows are using -- only a ray-gun could make such a noise, don't you agree?" He agreed with me and took up his reading again. I could see that he was getting ahead much more easily now, and was glad. Pater had opened his eyes, and Mater continued to look out at the fluffy cloud cover below us. By tacit agreement the subject of comic book coinages was dropped and we did not take it up again. At Croyden he said, "Good-bye" politely, and disappeared into the crowd. I did not see him again.

However, our brief conversation had given me pause, and I deter-

mined then and there to devote some time on my return home to an explanation of some of our current comic book coinages which lie in wait for the enthusiasts of other lands. Our effort in this direction follows: that we can claim no definitiveness is obvious. The neologisms of today are the archeologisms of tomorrow -- a fancy way of saying that the former become old hat very soon.

* * *

Grammatically, our words may be considered Interjections, deriving, mostly, from nouns and verbs; or they may be purely onomatopoeic sounds of no recognizable provenance. One grammarian defines an Interjection as an outcry expressing pain, surprise, etc., and he further states, 'In general, Interjections belong to the oldest forms of speech and represent the most primitive type of sentence -- they are not words but sentences. Sentences are older than words.'

The foregoing definition which concerns itself mostly with human sounds must be enlarged in our case to include the sounds of inanimate objects. In comic books, OWTCH and MMM are clearly human-produced, but BLONK and BWAIE are not. BZZZ, RATTAS-HATTLE and the puzzling HOOOOWWOO are clearly onomatopoeic, and such words as THWACK, CHINGLE and SKRITCH are, too. KLANG (the noise of church bells) and RAT-A-TAT-TAT (a knocking), are obviously verb-derived interjections, as, too, is SHADDAP.

However, some coinages are harder to classify -- they must fend for themselves in the no-man's-land of the un-derived, awaiting the scholar who will finally award them a satisfactory category. Such phrases as BONG SWAR and PYOINNGG, the solecisms (or, perhaps, provincialisms) THUH (the) and TUH (to), NERTS, and some others are not easily classified. None of them are man-produced 'outcries' as OH, AH, etc.

It is not unusual for an idea to precede the symbol for it, and such is the case with many of the coinages considered here. Just as the discovery of Square Root by the Greeks, and Zero by the Arabs came before the invention of the symbols for them -- the square root sign and the 0 -- so more recently has the discovery of the Ray-Gun preceded the creation of the comic book signs PWOOOSH and PWAK for its action and/or noise. And although volcanos have erupted since the beginning of time, it is only recently that anyone has thought it worthwhile to make words (POOF and PTUI) descriptive of their activities. In this respect our modern comic book artists are prime innovators in their ability to assign recognizable symbols to our newer ideas.

The limited space in which these men must work, and the restrictions it imposes, should also be noted. The sentence "The happy fellow jingled his new-found wealth in his pocket" must be shortened, and the word CHINGLE substituted. Verbiage is a luxury which cannot be afforded when the same idea may be presented as tellingly with a single word.

In passing, we may say that from the standpoint of Phonetics certain interesting conclusions may be drawn from our coinages, although it is not our intention to go into the subject deeply. For instance, the two High Front Vowels transcribed phonetically as (i:) and (i) -- the sounds of 'queen' and 'it', respectively, are often associated in the comics with speed, lightness, or fear. EEEK, phonetically (i:k), is commonly, but not always, used in the confrontation of a woman and a mouse. The diphthong (ai) -- the I of Eng. 'child' -- is formed more towards the back of the mouth, and heard in YIPE. It is a more 'open' sound, pronounced with the tongue in a slightly lower position than the preceding (i:). The (ae) of Eng. 'father' and the (ɔ) and (ɔ:) of Eng. 'John' and 'talk' is formed with the tongue in a still more lowered and retracted position and used for sounds connected with heavy objects in flight or making forceful contact -- such as WHUMP, ZOT, SKRUNNCH, and many others. In general, the more closed High Vowels have less 'carrying' quality, while the Back, more open Vowels are of a more sonorous character. The former are properly associated with short-lived, staccato 'circumstances', while the latter express heavier, more resonant ones. But an extended treatment of the vowels and consonants used in the comics would make our paper over-long and is better left to other more competent persons.

We have limited ourselves here to comic books in English, despite the great popularity in the United States of certain French and Latin-American strips and books. Space does not permit the inclusion of so much material, nor have we found it necessary to include words which may be readily found in the usual dictionaries. MUMBLE, MUTTER, CLANK and a number of others will present no problem to foreigners with their bilingual word-books handy. We are concerned more with the WHOOPS, CHUGs, UHUMs, etc., which will elude even the most diligent of word-enthusiasts, be his word library ever so large.

I could not consider this introduction complete without grateful acknowledgement to my grandson, Thor, who gave me access to his large collection of comic books. These are most precious to him; ancient scrolls could hardly be guarded with more loving care. Thor is eleven.

Editor's note: Two articles in the Winter 1979 issue of Maledicta, "You Have Only Your Asterisk" by Laurence Urdang, and "Dingbatted Maledicta: Symbolic Euphemisms" by editor Reinhold Aman, nicely complement John McClellan's survey of comic book coinages. Dingbats are not only women such as Archie Bunker's wife Edith (in the former TV series "All In The Family"), but various typographical symbols (% ¢ \$ # @ & * ! ? §) used by artists to denote curses or obscene words. Aman urges readers to send him any dingbat examples they encounter in their reading, especially ones in foreign languages (331 South Greenfield Avenue, Waukesha, WI 53186).

A SHORT GLOSSARY OF COMIC BOOK COINAGES

Sources (immediately following the word listed)

ac - Andy Capp, bb - Beetle Bailey, bh - Broom-Hilda, bl - Blondie, bs - Brenda Starr, ca - Cathie, do - Doonesbury, g - Garth, ggs - Grimm's Ghost Stories, h - Hart, ha - Hagar, ih - Incredible Hulk, ju - Jumble Puzzle, k - Koky, kk - Krazy Kat, ll - Little Lulu, loa - Little Orphan Annie, m - Margie, mc - Marvel Comics, mm - Mickey Mouse, p - Peanuts, pp - Pink Panther, rf - Robot Fighters, rk - Rip Kirby, s - Shoe, sf - Science Fiction, sm - Spider Man, sw - Spider Woman, tgs - True Ghost Stories, wi - West Indian Comic, ww - Wonder Woman, wwp - Woody Woodpecker, wwt - Weird War Tales

Abbreviations

aug - augmentative, cf - compare, Eng - English, Fr - French, ono - onomatopoeia, ooo - of obscure origin, qv - which see, v infr - see below, v supr - see above, var - variant

AAH h Unbelieving astonishment. A prehistoric noise (also AAAR-BRGH).

AAAA h A noise of great annoyance (cf RRRR, GGGG, HHHH).

AAGH ha Sudden surprise and fear.

ggs Fear of falling.

AAAH kk Deep sorrow.

AARGH ac A nightmare noise.

AH-CHOO h A sneeze.

AH HA kk Light of understanding suddenly breaks.

AHPFOO kk A sneeze (cf AH-CHOO, v supr).

AIEEE wi Woman being pinched.

ARF loa A dog-noise.

ARGH sf A fear-noise.

AROOM ggs Sound of a bulldozer.

BAA ha A sheep-noise(ono; cf HONK, GRR).

BALLOOM rk Noise of striking.

BAM ha A drawbridge being let down.

wi A door being broken down.

BASHOW wi Woman hitting an insulter with a saucepan.

BIMP h An apple falling.

BLAM bl Bursting a blown-up paper bag (cf KA-BLAM).

BLANT ha (sometimes BLAT) Sound of a horn.

h Sound of Neolithic love-making.

BLONK kk A hitting noise, as when a brick strikes someone (also BOPP, BOOM, and BOMM).

BOO ll A ghost-noise.

BOOF ac A noise made in falling.

BONG ha A clock striking.

BONG SWAR kk Good-night (from Fr).

BOP ac Taking a tumble.

BONK p Head hitting ground.

ha Rock striking a Viking helmet.

h Any hitting noise (cf BOINK)

BRAT-TAT mc Burp-gun.
 BRRR bl An alarm-clock.
 BTAM ih Hitting and penetrating a brick wall.
 BUPP wi A blow to the jaw.
 BWAIE wi A gun going off.
 BZZZ kk A whispering.

CHINGLE wi Noise of money in pocket (cf JINGLE).
 CHUG ww Noise of a train.
 CLANNG rf Metal hitting ground.
 CLANK bh Same as above.
 CLOMP ww Sound of heavy animals walking.
 CLUMP tgs Noise of falling downstairs.
 CRAK ha Crackling knuckles.
 CRRRZZ sf ooo

EEE h A noise of fear, as when a lady sees a mouse.
 wi Same as above.
 EEEKKKK k Aug form of the above; extreme fear.
 EEK ac Surprised disbelief; fear.
 EEP bh Noise of fear and surprise (cf the milder WHOOPS).

FAZZZAK sf A science-fiction explosion (see FZZAM).
 FLUMP h A heavy object hits the ground.
 FOO-EH h A derisive sound (ooo).
 FOOM h A volcano noise; an eruption.
 mc Noise of blasting.
 FOM FOM FOM sf Ray-gun discharges (cf PWOK).
 FUY kk Derisive (ooo).
 FWIP sm Noise of a line being thrown (cf WHIP).
 FWISSHH sw 'Living flame erupted from her fingers'.
 FWOOSH mc Another ray-gun sound.
 FZZAM sf Var of FAZZZAK (v supr).

GAAAGG tgs Terrorized.
 GARUF m A dog (ono) (cf HONK, BAA).
 GAWRSH mm Interjection of surprise (probably from GOSH).
 GGG h Similar to AAA (qv).
 GLANG kk A dinner bell (ono) (also GLENG, GLONG and GLUNG).
 GLOOMP h On swallowing a stone.
 GLURB mm An underwater sound (cf BLOOB, GOOB).
 GNISH h A variant of GRONK (qv).
 GNUFF h Same as above.
 GONK bh A thrown object scores a hit.
 GROG h Similar to GRONK (v infr).
 GRONK h A prehistoric animal noise.
 GRR ac An angry sound, similar to GARUF, but human-produced.
 GRROWLL mm A sound of growling (probably aug of GRR).

HALP ww Var of HELP; a solecism.
 HAR HAR ll Var of HA HA, a laugh.
 HAW HAW kk Same as above, but more vulgar, perhaps derisive.
 HEE HEE p A chuckle, sometimes derisive.

HIC ac A hiccough noise (ono).
 HONK ha A goose noise (cf BAA).
 HOOOOWWWOO ggs A whimpering of hounds.
 HRMPF sh Noise preceding sleep.
 HUD (or HUT) sm A signal in football from the quarterback to the center to set the ball in motion (ooo) (cf Army slang HUT, the cadence in marching).
 HUH? ww What?
 HUH-HUH kk A snicker.
 HUM p 'Now, let me think...'

KA-BLAM do Noise of thrown objects.
 KA-BLAST pp An explosion.
 KABLOWIE h Running into someone.
 KA-VOOM ww An explosion.
 KAZANGO h Something crashes through a tree.
 KERTHWAN sm A Spider Man noise (ooo).
 KIK-KLICK wi Loading a magazine into a gun (ono).
 KLANG kk Church bells (ono).
 KLENK kk Noise of sabres struck together.
 KLOPP kk Noise of wooden shoes (ono).
 KLUNK kk Brick hitting ground.
 ac Falling on head, or running into something.
 KOFF (or KAFF) pp A cough (ono).
 KRRUMPP mc Noise of destruction.
 KWA mc Indeterminate noise (ooo).
 KWONK kk Akin to BOPP and BLONK (qv).

M-M-M kk Sounds of cognition - 'Now, I wonder...' (also HM-M).
 MMM ac Same as above.
 g Mumbling sound of a gagged person.
 MRMF sh Sound of thinking.

NERTS mc Derisive interjection (ooo) (probably from NUTS).
 NOK ll (ono) (probably from KNOCK).

OH-H kk Sorrowful interjection.
 OH-OHH ac Fearful surprise.
 OMIGOSH mm Contraction of OH MY GOSH; generally, surprise -- pleased or otherwise.
 OOF m Sound of a dog.
 ih Hitting a wall.
 ww Someone being hit.
 OUCH mm Interjection of pain.
 OWTCH kk Aug var of OUCH: 'pinked' in a duel.
 OWW ac Pain (var of OUCH).
 OWWCH g Same as above.

PEEEP kk A bee-noise (also PFAA, PFUF with same meaning).
 PFUI kk A snort of disdain.
 PING kk Two balls hitting together (perhaps from PING PONG).
 PLOOSH sm ooo
 PLOP ? Probably a var of FLOP.

PLUNK h A dropped coin.
 POOF h Noise associated with volcanos.
 POW kk The sudden landing of a brick.
 mc A destructive noise.
 PTUI h Satellite hitting volcano.
 PWOK mc A ray-gun noise.
 PYOINNGG sm A tremendous blow (perhaps from Fr POING, a fist).

RAFF m A dog noise.
 RAT A TAT-TAT ac A knock (ono).
 RATTA-SHATTLE wi A gate being shaken, to get attention.
 ROWF m Same as RAFF above.
 RRRR h A sound of great annoyance (cf AAAA).
 RUFF m (ooo) (Probably akin to RAFF, above).

SCRURCH wi Small car taking off, overfast.
 SHADDUP ac A solecism on a vulgarism: keep still (from SHUT UP).
 SHOO kk To 'scat' a cat (see SKAT v infr).
 SHOOIE h A prehistoric animal noise.
 SHWOOSH kk A noise to make something disappear.
 SKAT kk To 'scat' a cat (see SHOO v supr).
 SKATCH ll Violin noise of an amateur.
 SKNK (or SKNXX) bl A sleep noise; snoring.
 SKRITCH ll A violin noise (see SKATCH).
 SKROTCH ll Same as above.
 SKRUNNCH ih Noise of penetrating a wall.
 SKWAA kk A motorcycle siren.
 SLURP ha An eating noise.
 SMAKK kk A kiss.
 SNOOK h Prehistoric animal noise.
 SPLAM ih Running head-on into a monster.
 SPLAT ha Foot hitting a puddle (also SPLAAT).
 SPLINGE h, wi Contents of a frying-pan dumped on someone.
 SQOOZ bh A squeeze by a vulture.
 SVOK! SVAM! sm A fight.
 SWAK sw ooo
 SWOOSH kk Someone getting squirted, or otherwise wetted.

TATA TAAA kk Happy humming.
 TCH ac A click of the tongue meaning 'Too bad', or 'You really shouldn't have done that' (a very primitive interjection).
 THOOMP pp (ooo) (Perhaps from THUMP, to slap or beat).
 THRAAKK ih Noise of demolition.
 THRAM mc A destructive noise (sometimes THRAMM).
 THUH mm Var spelling of THE.
 THUM sm ooo
 THUNK wwt Sound of an arrow piercing a tank.
 THWACK sh A noise of hitting.
 THWAK ha Noise of knives being thrown into a wooden door.
 THWIPP sm Noise of Spider Man's web being hurled.
 TRUND h ooo
 TUH mm, wi Var spelling of TO.
 TWANG ha Sound of a bow-string (ono).

UGHHH ac Disgusted noise.
 UHUM kk Cogitative interjection meaning 'Now, let me think...'
 UNGH wi Violent monosyllable.
 UH wi I, or a.

VOOF ha A dog noise (also VOFF).
 VOOM mc An indeterminate noise (ooo).

WA-AH ac Crying.
 WAH ac Tears, anger.
 ju Noise of a wet baby.
 WAW ll Crying.
 WAR kk Same as above.
 WHAA mc Tears.
 WHAM h Noise of laundry being beaten on a stone, in a stream.
 WHANG h A hitting noise.
 WHAP h Similar to above.
 WHOO bb Noise of an owl.
 WHOOF bl Noise of speedy departure.
 WHOOPS bh (cf EEP).
 WHUMP sm, h a hit; falling after ski jump.
 ww Train hitting end of line.
 WOOF m A dog noise (cf ROWF, RAFF, OOF).
 WONK s When one falls asleep and head hits table.
 WOW do Noise of surprise.
 WWOWF bs An enraged animal, biting.
 WUH wi Where (var spelling).
 WUN wi One (var spelling).

YAAAY ll A joyous noise.
 YAK wi A noise of much talk (also YAKKIT Y).
 YAP m A dog noise.
 YEOOW bl Noise of hurt.
 YEOOUCH bh Same as above.
 YI loa Surprise and fear at a brandished scimitar.
 YIP m A dog noise.
 YIPE ha, bh A startled cry.
 ww Astonishment.
 YIPES sf Noise of fear.
 YIPPEE ww A joyous noise.
 YOFF ha Another dog sound.
 YYYNNHHH tgs An eerie sound (ooo).

ZAK h Hitting a ball.
 ZAM kk Kicking something, as a bucket.
 ZANG h Noise of an anteater catching a clam.
 ZANGO h Neanderthal love-making sound.
 ZAP ha A war-noise.
 h A Neanderthal slap.
 bh A bewitching sound.
 ZAZ kk Sound of something being thrown.
 ZIP h An armadillo rolling into a ball.
 kk A projectile like a brick or boomerang in flight.

ZKAK sw A 'deadly blast of venom'.
 ZOOOM ac Sound of hasty departure.
 ZOT h Lightning, generally hitting something.
 ZZIZTP sm The hurling of a web.
 Z-Z-Z kk Noise associated with sleep.

A MAIL AUCTION OF WORD BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

Palmer Peterson's extensive library of old dictionaries, puzzle magazines and other National Puzzlers' League material was willed to Murray Pearce, 410 Avenue B West, Bismarck, North Dakota 58501. He now offers at auction that part of this collection which duplicates his own, with all proceeds to be donated to the National Puzzlers' League. Those wishing to participate should write to him for a full three-page listing (send a self-addressed stamped legal-sized envelope). Bids will be accepted until October 1, 1980. If more than one person bids on a particular item, all such bidders will be notified of the high bid to date and will be given a chance to make one additional bid if they desire. A sample of the material available:

Eastern Enigma and Enigma issues dating back to 1899, with a nearly complete run (missing one issue, December 1969) from 1931 to date
 Word Ways, complete through February 1979 (45 issues)
 The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary
 A Key to Puzzledom, 1906
 Webster's New International Dictionary, first and second editions
 Levine's Pattern Word List, Volume 1 (2-letter through 9-letter words)
 Berrey and Van Den Bark, The American Thesaurus of Slang, 1947
 The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia, 1904
 Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary, 1950
 Frederick Webb Hodge, Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico, 1912